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FOOTNOTES TO THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

“The Shameful Business”: Leslie Spier on the Censure of Franz Boas

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The American Anthropological Association's 1919 censure of Franz Boas is part of American anthropology's historical canon—though the institutional meaning of this event remains contested. To some—including Leslie Spier in the letter here reproduced—it suggests the AAA should refrain from making ethical evaluations of anthropologists, while for others it provides an important historical justification for denouncing the mixing of anthropology and espionage.

George Stocking's 1968 analysis provides an important framework for understanding the institutional, personal and professional events that converged with this vote. Stocking establishes that the vote against Boas predominantly came from anthropologists with ties to Harvard and Washington, D.C.—institutions outside Boas' academic stronghold at Columbia University. Thus in this instance, “outraged patriotism was simply the trigger that released a flood of pent-up personal resentment and institutional antagonism” (Stocking 1968:292). In the years since Stocking's examination, further work has focused on other aspects of the censure. Marshall Hyatt suggests that anti-Semitism may have been involved in the vote against Boas (Hyatt 1990). In *Unfinished Conversations: Mayas and Foreigners Between the Wars*, Paul Sullivan produces his own list of anthropologists operating as Central American spies during the First World War, including Arthur Carpenter, Thomas Gann, John Held, Samuel Lothrop, Sylvanus Morley and Herbert Spinden (1989:132). Regna Darnell, in her account of the censure episode, discussed the identities and institutional ties of those who voted for and against (1998:261-65). Other writers use this episode to consider the ethical problems of covert research and of links between anthropologists and intelligence agencies (Fluehr-Lobban 1991; Price 2000). For other descriptions or analysis of Boas's censure see: *American Anthropologist* (1920); Goldfrank (1978); Kroeber (1943); Pinsky (1992).

Because Boas did not name the four anthropologist-spies in his letter to *The Nation* (Boas 1919), the identities of Boas's four spies have been somewhat problematic with different sources leading scholars to various conclusions (cf. Price 2000; Sullivan 1998). While the publication of Spier's letter is not intended to resolve these issues it does provide one (albeit belated) eyewitness account of these proceedings. Spier's letter adds a new significance to Darnell's finding that Samuel Lothrop, Sylvanus Morley and Herbert Spinden were among the anthropologists who voted in favor of Boas's censure at the 1919 AAA meeting (1998:264).

Reproduced below is an account of the censure episode written by Leslie Spier, thirty-two years after the fact, in response to a query from David Stout (dated 10/27/51), the secretary of the AAA from 1947 to 1951. Stout spent years accumulating information for a never completed history of the first half-century of the Association (see Trager 1974:73), and as part of this work wrote to a variety of senior anthropologists asking for their accounts of Association events. Spier's reply to Stout's query is preserved among the papers of the American Anthropological Association, at the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives (Box 130) and is reproduced in full below with their kind permission.

Post Office Box 880
Santa Cruz California
October 31, 1951

Dear Dr. Stout:

I will get off an answer to your letter at once since I know that you have not much time before the annual meeting of the AAA. You've undertaken quite a job there, writing the history of the Association, and we thank you for doing it. It is just as well that something of the sort be put together now while some of the founders and men who were members in earlier years are still with us.

I will answer your two questions to the best of my recollection. And since I want to write frankly, so that you will have the whole background, and I want to name names, I am sure you will use these words with discretion. I do not mind, of course, being quoted where it is necessary.

First, as to the Honorary Memberships. So far as I recall there was no particular problem or conflict over abolishing this title. There had been no new names proposed for several years; Spinden I think, was supposed to propose some but just didn't bother. Whereon someone said why keep it up? There was no particular honor involved, no obvious candidates, and there was some thought that the "honor" might be misplaced or misused. It was thought that anyone who cared enough to participate in the Association would join as an active member. So it was just dropped out of our reckoning.

Yes, I was present at the meeting in 1919 when the famous—or rather, infamous—Boas resolution was presented. I think I ought tell you all I know of the background—and I believe I do know since, though a youngster, I was very close to the people most concerned. Boas was an austere, severe, and complete scientist: science was his life, his every energy bent on pushing the scientific aspects of his chosen discipline and nothing else. It is true he sometimes identified his personal preferences and ideas with his science and was at time rather ruthless in insisting on his way and his choice of men. He was also a thoroughgoing internationalist, as only a true scientist is permitted to be. His internationalism, calling for a world community of scholars and other intelligent men, had as its corollary a thorough-paced pacifism (strange and archaic word, isn't it?). Witness his "An Anthropologist's View of War" published by the (Carnegie Foundation-backed) American Association for International Conciliation in 1912. Further, Boas' background gave him a feeling of sympathy for Germany in the war of '14-'18; not that he was pro-German, but he felt that both sides were equally right and wrong. The letter to The Nation "Scientists as Spies" was dictated more by Boas' fundamental notion that science was not to serve national interests than by any Germanophilism. For him science came first; patriotism, nationalism were not the most fundamental virtues taking precedence over all else.

The particular case which he caviled at involved four anthropologists: [J. Alden] Mason, [Herbert] Spinden, [Sylvanus] Morley (I think) and a fourth I do not remember [inserted in the margin by hand is "Lothrop"—presumably Samuel K. Lothrop]. They had Navy appointments, went to Central America in civilian clothes ostensibly to do scientific work, but were instrumental in securing significant information for war purposes and in engaging the sympathies of notables in the lands they visited. This was something new and unthinkable in those days—such men were then called spies: nowadays, when anything goes, this sort of thing is taken as a matter of course.

To the specific incident—One should know that Charles Walcott, Secretary of the Smithsonian, was Boas' bitter enemy (because Boas challenged Walcott's smooth glad-handing). Walcott saw his opportunity in The Nation letter: [Neil] Judd was his willing stooge. Judd backed by [Ales] Hrdlicka, presented the resolution printed in the 1919 proceedings. The lines were drawn very bitterly at the meeting: mind you, this was a year after the Armistice. I remember that [Clark] Wissler, who was in the chair, was very ill at ease, as well he might be, quite apart from the fact that he and Boas had for many years ceased to be friends (that's another interesting story). I remember that even I took part, asking as point of order whether the Constitution said anything about our concerning ourselves with affairs outside the Association (something that had better be thought of again today), but they had the matter on their hands and went ahead with it. I also recall an amusing incident: this was a Council meeting: George Byron Gordon was present: when the vote was called for, he voted, on which he was challenged as a non-Council member. I remember that Gordon almost had apoplexy when he learned this—but they counted him in anyway. As I see it now, some, if not many of the men who voted anti-Boas were simply recording the customary patriotic attitude of the day.

The resolution was passed: apart from simply stating that Boas' letter did not represent the view of the Association, passing it on to the National Research Council meant that Boas had to withdraw from the latter for the sake of peace. I do not wholly understand Kroeber's reference on p. 20 of the Memoir [Kroeber 1943], to which you directed my attention. So far as I can judge "the most stinging action" Kroeber remarks on was dropping Boas' name from the Council list. There could have been no formal action to oust him from the council, else it had been recorded in the proceedings. Evidently Boas' term on the Council was up and they did not reelect him. (It should be remarked here that two men, O.T. Mason and Boas, between them were the original instigators and founders of the Association; hence it was by no means a light thing that Boas was dropped from the Council). Walcott also took the occasion, with great glee, to drop Boas as Honorary Linguist of the Bureau: this accounts for the publication of volumes of the Handbook of American Indian Languages, after the first two, outside of the Bureau (on money Boas scared up).

It was not many years before the whole thing was forgotten; as Kroeber says, Boas soon found himself back on the Council. But I will add that some of us have never forgotten or forgiven Judd for his oily (not early) willingness to be a tool—and we know of nothing in his life that can be taken as a redeeming feature.

Mason may have another story, since he was a participant and involved himself. I know he was—and is—fair-minded about it, so that any discrepancy will probably be mine. I think I recall that Mason found himself in a very embarrassing position: he had followed the call of patriotism without thinking of the ethics of the situation beyond that. Boas was his great friend and had indeed introduced Mason into Central America, while the latter had unwittingly used this smoothing of the way in a manner which his mentor Boas could not condone. As for Spinden and Morley, what they thought?—I don't think they thought at all.

Having started all this, I find I have written at length—perhaps much more than you want. But here it is, as I recall the shameful business. It seems to me that the moral of the whole thing is that the Association having very nearly involved itself in much the same kind of thing several times recently, had better recognize that what goes on among its members which does not bear directly on the Association's affairs is none of its business.

I was a youngster in those days, but curiously enough (for I never think of myself as growing older) I find myself as one of the oldest members of the Association now living. I became a member at the 1913 meeting along with [Alexander] Goldenweiser, [E.W.] Gifford, Elsie Parsons,

Hooton, and [Alfred] Kidder. I would naturally, like to be along at this fiftieth anniversary, but it is out of the question. I wish you all a very successful and happy meeting and at least fifty more good years of existence to the Association.

Please do not bother to acknowledge this letter. I am sure you have enough to do, especially at the moment.

Sincerely, Leslie Spier

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